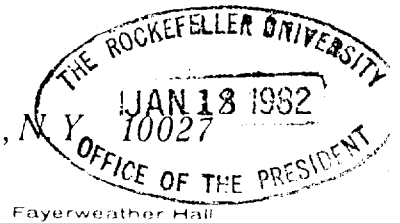


Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N.Y.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY



January 14, 1982

Dear Mr Lederberg:

Thank you for your note and the offprints of your Tatum biography and other pieces. I'd be happy to discuss any of the questions you raise about biographical principles and techniques with you at your convenience. However, I doubt you need much help from me. I think your sktech of Tatum is superb. As editor of the recent supplements of the Dictionary of American Biography I have found few scientists who are capable of writing such interesting (and to a layman like me) clear sketches of people whose work dealt with ideas and terms I am unfamiliar with. You are the exception. Your comments about temporal sequence, changes in the subjects life, and the ultimate question--"what really did he do?" get to the heart of biography, and as you say, the principles are obvious but difficult.

As to the specific questions about the Tatum sketch, I feel you ought to have mentioned his marriage to his first wife at an appropriate point. Then you could have said they were divorced and that that helps explain the move to Rockefeller. (You dont have to explain why they were divorced--assuming anyone knows--but you are leaving a permanent record and who knows when someone 50 years from now will have a reason for wanting to know?) The worst thing is vagueness. When you mention the loss of his second wife you are telling readers that there was a first but we have no idea, who, when they were married, and why they were no longer married. Similarly, your note about the tragic irony of the second wife's demise will be lost to future readers. "Rather younger" sounds to me like "lots younger" and makes me have all sorts of lewd thoughts about an old goat in his 60s marrying a chorus girl. If the second wife was very much younger I think that ought to be mentioned, tho again there would be no necessary reason to comment on that fact. My point here is that vagueness ought to be avoided; ^{but} though questions involving people's motives can be left out--after all, we never really know why people do most of the things they do.

Your questions in the Ryan piece, or rather your way of handing the material you refer to in the questions, seems to me unexceptionable. But here you are giving us autobiography--your own recollections dont need footnotes, tho when you have contemporary records to back up citing them increases the reader's confidence in your honesty and memory.

Since you seem so interested in the problems of biography, I enclose a copy of a book on the subject I wrote some time ago. Do let me know if I can be of further "help"--I use quotation marks because, as I said, you really dont to seem to need help.

Sincerely,

John A Garraty
John A Garraty

* Was it death or divorce?